Adventure One: Freeing Fezzik



The Many Adventures of The Dread Pirate Roberts

Shawn Michel de Montaigne

The Many Adventures of the Dread Pirate Roberts
Adventure One: Freeing Fezzik
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The Many Adventures of the Dread Pirate Roberts

Dedicated to all those pirates out there
with nobility and heroism in their hearts.

Chapter 1

The Dread Pirate Roberto

I DIDN'T know what to think of him at first, of course. No one knows what to think of strangers when you're introduced to them. Olive did the honors. I was the first to stick out my hand, but the new captain's hesitation to grasp mine back had nothing to do with affecting airs or any sense of captainly decorum. He was looking around, at the ship. The *Revenge*. His view came around to me, then down to my outstretched hand.

"How do you do?" he asked somewhat uncertainly. His Spanish accent was thick but wadeable. "Paloni? You are Paloni?"

I nodded.

His grip tightened. "Inigo Montoya," he said with obvious pride.

It was unnecessary, of course, to give his name. Everybody knew it. I have sailed with this ship going on a decade now, and I've never seen the men act like that: with visible awe as they took in the sight of their new captain. This was the man who almost singlehandedly brought down the corrupt Humperdinck monarchy, who killed the vile Count Rugen. Many of the *Revenge*'s finest had died by Rugen's cruel tortures over the years.

I admit to even feeling a bit awed myself. I tried to hide it. First officers don't feel awe at their captains. They're there to keep their captains firmly rooted to the earth—or to the deck of the ship, as the case may be.

"You are Italian?" he asked, still gripping my hand. By now I'd noticed his incredible sword and struggled with that, too. I looked up into his dark gaze. He was smiling in a very congenial way.

"I was born there, Captain. But when I was a young boy my family moved to England."

"Too much tea," he said after recovering from hearing his new title. He shook his head. "Not enough moscatel. Do you drink moscatel, Paloni?"

"I've never tried it, sir," I admitted. In truth, I'd never even heard of it.

His smile faded, though it did not vanish completely.

"Tonight, then, in my cabin" he said.

He looked around, came close so only I could hear. "Uh … where is my cabin, exactly?"

~~*~~

Here's the letter I received from Westley three weeks earlier:

Paloni:

I am writing to announce my immediate retirement as Captain of the Revenge. My replacement will be joining you shortly. His name is Inigo Montoya, a Spaniard. He is a swordmaster of the first caliber and a first-rate tactician. The rumors swirling about Florin about him are true: I was there when he brought down the Humperdinck monarchy. He was our leader and captain, and his bravery is something that will serve the Revenge well. Like me when I first joined the Revenge (and as I'm sure you remember, being the only one of the crew to stay on board over the tenures of the last four captains, including me), I had no knowledge of ships or sailing or even proper pirating. I, however, had the advantage of being the captain's valet for several years whilst I learned. You'll need to school the new Dread Pirate Roberts—on-the-job training, as it were, quietly and privately, of course—though I suspect pirating will come quite naturally to him. Be his right-hand man, as you were for me. He has a very generous spirit; but don't let him go too far with it, especially with the crew. He loves his drink as well, which is also something you'll have to watch out for. The best way to ensure his temperance is Purpose. Give that man a Purpose and the drink will be forgotten until that Purpose is fulfilled.

Buttercup and I are to be wed in Patagonia, at the estate of Captain Roberts (the first one, obviously). I would have preferred to utilize the Revenge and her crew for such a journey, but I think it best to give Captain Montoya a completely free hand from the off.

Provided that Captain Montoya doesn't already have other plans, I would be pleased if the crew of the Revenge would join us in Patagonia. You will need to arrive by November 28; we're to be wed on the 29th. If we don't see you then we will assume that the Revenge's new captain is already plundering towards great wealth.

Your friendship is one I shall always cherish, Duncan. Thank you for all you've done for me.

The very best,

Westley

~~*~~

At eight o’ clock I knocked on his cabin door.

"Come in," he called out. I thought of Westley's voice, and how different it was, how I'd gotten used to it. Captain Montoya's voice was hollower but stronger, with a natural and sonorous timbre that immediately caught my ear. He'd

have no problem getting the attention of the crew, even without yelling. Another plus.

I entered the cabin.

He sat on a small couch that, as I recall, Captain Westley never touched, a wine glass of amber-colored liquor in his hand. The English oak desk at the back and downy bunk to the side were unmolested save for the presence of his sword and sword belt, which lay on the bunk. I looked back at him.

"The bottle and glasses are in the cabinet," he motioned with his glass hand.

I opened the armoire. The moscatel came in a fine green bottle sitting alone on the top shelf. I recall that he hadn't brought much with him when he boarded; the drink made up probably half of his duffel bag. I reached for the bottle, poured myself a small amount, closed the armoire and turned to face my new superior.

"To the future," he said, lifting his glass. I could hear the doubt in his voice.

I wasn't going to have to hold this captain to the deck; not initially, at least. I was going to have to teach him how to walk first.

I lifted my glass. "To our future, Captain."

I took a sip of the moscatel. It was wine, sweet and fruity, with a very pleasant aftertaste. My delight must've been obvious.

"I told you," he said with an approving glint in his eye. He took another drink, as did I.

"Sit, Paloni, sit." He motioned towards a chair. I sat.

Being First Mate aboard a seagoing vessel can be a tough and exacting job. I'd like to feel that I have weathered enough storms and battles and on-board politics to be an expert at it. But at that moment, sitting there with my new captain, I felt like a rank beginner. I didn't know what to say. I chanced a bold guess.

"There's something you've left behind, Captain."

He lowered his glass. "Come again?" he said quietly.

"I don't presume to read minds," I said quickly, misinterpreting his look, which seemed to flash impertinence. "Forgive me—"

"All my belongings are here," he said with just a hint of defensiveness. "I didn't forget anything …"

"I wasn't talking about material possessions," I said. I held up my hand. "Again, Captain, forgive my presumption."

"Material—? Ah." He got it. He took another sip. "Yes, I suppose I did."

"May I ask her name, Captain?"

He grinned. But the grin lasted only a second or two. "Not a woman," he said.

I blinked.

I wasn't about to ask, and it didn't matter in any event. After all, Captain Cummerbund wore a pink feather in his hat and ate with a pinkie finger sticking straight out, but no man dared poke fun at him. The single foolish sailor who did

found himself floating in four separate oceans. Assumptions don't make an "ass of u and me"—on a pirate ship they make you a dead man. In any event, I didn't have time to form one, as this captain said:

"My best friend, Fezzik. He's been taken prisoner at Harshtree. I fear for his life."

I remembered the name. "Fezzik?" I said vacantly. "I recall the stories. Wasn't he with you when you stormed the Humperdinck Castle?"

Captain Montoya nodded.

"A giant, right?"

"And a marvelous poet. He carried Westley's—" he caught himself—"Captain Westley's—body to Miracle Max's after Rugen killed him."

"Is it true he carried you and two others up the Cliffs of Insanity?"

He nodded again, took another sip. He didn't elaborate.

"Wow ..." I said breathlessly. "Forgive me, Captain, but that's hard to believe."

"I know," he said. "It is. And now he's a prisoner where few prisoners ever again see the light of day."

"How do you suppose he was taken? It must've taken an army!"

"Not an army," he said. He leaned forward. "You see, Paloni, Fezzik has a weakness." He held up a finger. "A single weakness. The men who subdued him must have known about it and exploited it."

"What is it?" I asked, fascinated.

He grasped his neck. "His windpipe. It is weak. A birth defect, most likely … Fezzik never talked about it, and told me only after he'd drank a barrel of mead. Someone must have overheard him."

"Someone who wanted to take him prisoner? Who would want to do that?"

He shook his head and leaned back. He appeared tortured, worried beyond the capacity to contain it.

The solution was obvious, of course.

"So … if I may recapitulate," I began, "your best friend Fezzik has been taken prisoner for unknown reasons and resides at Harshtree."

He nodded. He seemed genuinely oblivious to his new station, as though it were merely a ceremonial one and that he'd be leaving the *Revenge* in the morning. I knew then why the cabin had been for all intents and purposes untouched since he'd boarded.

"Harshtree is just a couple miles in from Dredskull Point," I casually pointed out, taking another sip. "Two days' sail time, three if stormy weather."

He nodded thoughtfully and waited for me to continue. He really didn't realize it. And it was right then that I knew he was going to make the *Revenge*'s finest captain. There were endless possibilities in that blank stare, all backed up with wicked steel and a towering sense of Spanish nobility that I'd intuited instantly

upon his arrival.

That said, I'd have to spell it out for him.

"Your crew is assembled and ready, twenty-four total. We are the *Revenge*, feared all over the world. The *Revenge*, sir! And we are at your command. Isn't the warden of Harshtree one of Rugen's rich friends?"

He'd figured it out halfway through my speech. I watched a glitter sparkle to life in his eyes, a slow, hesitant smile form on his lips. He put the moscatel on the side table next to the sofa's armrest, turned back to look at me, and leaned forward.

"Can we succeed?"

"Like I said, we're the *Revenge*," I answered. "Success is all we do." I smiled. "You required only yourself, Captain Westley, and Fezzik to overthrow an entire kingdom."

I waited for that to sink in before asking, "Your orders, sir?"

I love being First Mate of this ship.

"In the morning we set sail for Harshtree," he said. "I will get my Fezzik back."

And thus began the *Revenge*'s first adventure with the Dread Pirate … *Roberto*.

Chapter 2

Sealegless

I WOKE the crew at first light. It wasn't like me to impose strict military discipline on them, but I felt it appropriate for some reason, one that I could not define. I knocked at the captain's door half an hour later. He was already awake.

"Come in, Paloni."

I opened the door.

Captain Montoya was in a fresh change of clothes. He was making his bunk. "I heard bootsteps," he commented.

I misunderstood him.

"I should have told the men you were still sleeping, Captain; my apologies—"

"Never wake me again after the crew," he ordered, his face very serious. "From now on you wake me first, then the crew. Do we have an understanding?"

I was completely taken aback. The captains previous to this one, including Westley, enjoyed what I'd long ago termed "the grand appearance": ascending to the quarterdeck well after the men had gone about their chores. It was one of the perks of being a captain—the salutes, the "good morning, Captain" greetings, the (what I imagine) feeling would be to come up to see your men busying themselves about your ship, following your orders from the night past, awaiting your presence.

He was staring at me. I must've looked like an imbecile—my face blank, gaping. I caught up to the moment, said, stuttering, "C-Certainly, Captain. My apologies."

He nodded once, sternly, then went back to making up his bunk. I didn't have the nerve at that point to tell him that was for one of the crew to do, as well as seeing to it that his papers and other effects were in order. It was obvious from the quick sweep of the room I took then that he'd taken care of those tasks as well.

"Have the crew taken their breakfast?" he asked.

"I believe so, yes," I answered.

"Starting tomorrow, we all have breakfast together, in the … er … the place where they eat."

"The crew mess?"

"That's it. The 'mess.' "

He eagle-eyed me. "Problem, Paloni?"

I jerked my head left, right. "Uh … no. No, sir."

A captain eating with his men! With his officers, sure … but the grunts, the *scrubs?*

Having spent time on Her Majesty's vessels in my youth, this kind of break of decorum would be seen as court martial offense!

But this was a pirate vessel. And even though some of *Revenge*'s crew were castoffs from various navies, the fact remained that they now sailed under a rebel flag.

I was already nervous for breakfast tomorrow.

Captain Montoya's gaze didn't waver. I had once again drifted off. I rallied, stiffening:

"Orders, sir?"

"I'm hungry," he said.

"I'll bring you some grub," I responded immediately.

He nodded. "Bring some for yourself as well. And then let's sit and discuss how we're going to free my friend Fezzik."

"Orders for the crew, sir?"

"Uh …" He looked at me blankly. "Uh …"

"Might I suggest, sir, that they make ready to set sail for Harshtree?"

"Yes. That would be good. Do that, Paloni. Harshtree."

"Yes, sir," said I, saluting. I felt breathless and utterly discomposed.

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The tentative plan turned out to be the expected one: a full frontal assault on the fortress itself. We'd begin with cannonfire: it was my bet that no prison the likes of Harshtree had ever been fired on by an offshore vessel. We pored over maps.

"Can the cannons reach that far—two miles?" he asked. Dredskull Point, where Harshtree was located, reached like a partially submerged skeletal finger into the sea.

"No, sir," I admitted. "But—look …" I pointed at the map. "See where Harshtree is? At the base of the point itself. We could approach from the west. There are cliffs there. Not too high, but enough to shield us from view from their parapets with a little luck and some fog. From the cliffs the walls of Harshtree are less than a hundred yards. If we can get up close, if we have calm seas, we aim the cannons up. We fire over them. We probably won't do much damage, but that's okay: our objective is to convince them that they're under attack. From the point itself, meanwhile, we could send in men to make an assault on the main gates."

He looked at me as though I was crazy. Then he smiled.

"There were sixty men guarding the front gates of Humperdinck's castle," he reminded me unnecessarily. "We lit Fezzik on fire and wheeled him towards them. What a sight it was, Paloni," he added with a dreamy grin. "The fire singed my moustache." He twisted one end of it.

"The men scattered at the sight," I said. "That's how you got in."

He shook his head. "That's how we got access to the gates. Humperdinck's top henchman was the only one left to stand his ground. The Man In Black—" he stopped—"Captain Westley ordered him to give us the gate key. He said he didn't have it. I told Fezzik to tear his arms off." Captain Montoya shrugged. "Just like that, we have the gate key and we're in."

He stared at me. "Is that what you're suggesting—some sort of deception at the front gates of Harshtree?"

I shook my head.

"Well?" he demanded. "Out with it, Paloni!"

"One of the prison administrators is … friendly to the *Revenge*. Sir," I offered quickly.

Captain Montoya grinned. "Friendly?"

"He was once a crewman aboard ship. His name is Bacco. He has many talents, most of them dubious."

"How can we get word to him that we're coming?"

I shook my head. "We can't. But I don't believe we need to."

"Why?" He had a devilish grin on his face.

"He'll surely have heard of your becoming captain of this vessel. And since everyone in Florin knows of you, sir, they'll know of Fezzik as well. That includes him. He's a very clever man, Bacco. He'll know you'll make an attempt to break him out. He's probably already plotted out the moves and made preparations. He's probably waiting right now."

The ship lurched and settled that moment, which told me that the *Revenge* had cast off lines and was leaving port. He brought his gaze up from the map and said, "What do I do next?"

"It might be good for you to man the wheel for a little bit, sir. Let the crew see you."

He nodded in agreement. "Yes. Yes. Good idea, Paloni."

I turned to leave the cabin. He grabbed my shoulder, stopped me.

"Don't go too far. I don't know how to steer."

"No, sir," I said. "I won't."

~~*~~

I have to admit he looked grand at that wheel.

I showed him a little about how to navigate the vessel as the coastline shrank behind us. I pointed out the many facets and parts of a tall ship, all of which, I'm

sure, did not stick. I brought him tea, which he grudgingly took. I sipped mine with him while we watched the crew work under the bosun's steely stare.

Later, in the mess, he shared with the rest of the crew our plans. They looked unsure at first—not of the plans, but of the presence of the captain in their mess. But his affability quickly won them over. Soon he was sharing ribald jokes and laughing.

Our new captain did not have his sea legs yet, and as the *Revenge* dipped and rose on swells kicked up by a strong breeze, another problem came up. I noticed a green pallor creeping steadily up his face maybe two hours after he ate breakfast.

"The crew will understand, Captain," I said consolingly.

He gave me a look that told me he would not tolerate another comment of that kind ever issuing from my mouth again.

"You have your own private john," I informed him up close. "No one will know."

He looked close to losing it.

"Let me help you, Captain. Follow me … "

I barely got him down the stairs and into his cabin when he vomited.

"Aughghgh!" he croaked, bent over.

"It won't last long, sir. You'll get used to the motion over time."

"How long?" he coughed. “I don’t understand! When I crewed that singleship to the Cliffs of Insanity, I didn’t get seasick! Why now?”

"You probably crossed calm seas and weren’t sailing for too long is my guess. You shouldn’t be sick too long, sir. Sometimes it takes a day, sometimes a couple of weeks will take care of the problem."

He gave me a look that told me unequivocally that two weeks of seasickness was not an option.

"Mint tea, sir, is what I recommend."

"Mint—?" And he threw up again.

"I will prepare it now. And I'll have the bosun send someone to clean up the mess—"

"No! No, Paloni! I'll do it … *aughghghgh!*"

That Spanish pride. I couldn't even imagine the *Revenge*'s prior captains stooping to such menial, not to mention disgusting, work. Even Captain Westley wouldn't have done it. This captain, though, did not want his crew to see him defeated by the sea.

"Mint … *aughghghgh!* … Mint tea, Paloni. Get me some. Anything. Now. *Now!*"

"Yes, sir," I said, and quickly closed the door to the cabin.

Chapter 3

Good Deeds

FOG ENVELOPED us as we made our approach to Dredskull Point. Normally I'd be happy about it—fog. It's great for hiding in. But not here. Not at Dredskull Point.

There wasn't a lighthouse to guide us in. That was intentional, to dissuade those like us from attempting a landing and doing what we were planning on doing, which was to break a prisoner out. To get to Harshtree, one must go by foot, over land. The sea provides protection from two sides; the land side is heavily fortified with thick stone walls, guards, and attack dogs, and a virtually impenetrable forest that stops just feet from the first wall (hence the name "Harshtree").

As a challenging first mission, this was a doozy.

"Aughghghgh!" said Captain Montoya when I said this to him. He was on his knees, his head hanging over the bowl of his loo.

Sometimes the best way to motivate a man is to give him a challenge. He rises above himself in the undertaking of it, spurring him on to even greater ones.

But perhaps my timing was a little off.

I apologized.

"Aughghghgh!" was his answer.

He spat into the bowl, then said, "Three days, Paloni. Three days!"

"Would encouraging news help?" I asked gingerly.

"What news?" he demanded. His voice sounded hollow as he spoke into the bowl.

"I've been timing your bouts of nausea and vomiting," I offered. "They're definitely coming at wider and wider intervals. Soon they'll be gone completely!"

He looked at me. His face was green, his eyes bloodshot. It was quite clear he didn't put that information under "encouraging news," and it was equally clear that he expected some of the genuine variety, and immediately, the consequences of me failing to give it to him possibly involving me being offered as shark bait. That was the look in his eyes.

"And … and … " I stuttered, "have I told you that Captain Cummerbund's crew

landed at Dredskull Point … which means we can, too?"

"I thought you told me that no one has landed there, that everyone who's tried has died!"

"Yes, sir," I said, "I did say that. It turns out one of our crew served under Captain Cummerbund. He says the captain found a way past the reefs and rocks. They landed only to find out the man they wanted to break free had been beheaded that very morning. They got back to the longboats just in the nick of time, apparently; the prison guards were alerted to their presence and almost captured them."

He stared at me.

"The point is," I pushed on, "that instead of guessing at a landing point, we can use Captain Cummerbund's map. Uh … provided, uh, that is, uh, that we can find it."

~~*~~

But we couldn't. In desperation I ordered the old sailor who'd landed at Dredskull Point with Captain Cummerbund to accompany me to the captain's quarters, which smelled strongly of vomit.

The captain was sitting at his desk, slumped over it, a mug of lukewarm water in his grip.

The old sailor saluted. Captain Montoya lifted his fingers limply, dropped them. I took that as a return salute and told the man to sit.

"This is Dauchkin, sir," I said.

Dauchkin saluted again, then removed his scarf and used it to wipe down the chair and then to sit on it.

The captain lifted his head and took a very tiny sip of water before croaking, "Paloni says you were with Captain Cummerbund when he landed at Dredskull Point."

"Yes, sir," he said quickly. His thick British accent was even harder to understand by the gravel in it.

"How old are you, Dauchkin?" groaned the captain.

"Sixty-six this year, sir," said the crewman.

"We can't find Cummerbund's map," said Captain Montoya. "We can't find the way in through the rocks and reef. Can you remember the way?"

"It was during low tide, sir," said Dauchkin. "That much I remember. We approached from the east. There is a reef-rock that looks like the Devil's head, sir, when the tide is out. We stayed starboard of that, just enough to keep from grindin' up against it. I don' remember much more than that, but I do recall the cap'n yellin' for joy once we got past it. You see, sir, the way comes clear once ya get clear of the Devil. I’m sorry, sir, tha's all I remember."

Dauchkin's answer seemed hardly satisfactory, and I was about to say

something like, "The point is miles long and the fog is pea-soup thick! And we'd have to be at the right point at the right time at low tide to see it! Back to your duties, Dauchkin!"

But I stopped. Because a determined grin, albeit very small and tinted green, pulled up Captain Montoya' lips for the briefest of moments. I knew his utter lack of experience made him think that Dauchkin's memories were all we needed, but I weighed that against the last three days and the misery he'd gone through and shut up. The news seemed to drain the sickness from his face a little, and that was a good thing. I've seen seasickness before, but nothing like the kind that gripped our new captain.

"Dredskull Point," he said. "It was named as a marker for those looking for a way in."

I shook my head in wonder. It hadn't occurred to me to connect the two. The revelation made me feel stupid.

"There is no map," I offered. "I would bet the Crown Jewels on it now. Captain Cummerbund was the only one who's done it, and pounds to parrots says he wouldn't have recorded the way. He was a very smart man, as legend tells it, with a fantastic memory."

I could tell the captain was losing the strength and patience to continue talking.

"We can sail to the eastern approach within a half day, given care," I suggested quickly. "We can begin a search for it, longboats, the works."

He nodded and waved both of us out. Dauchkin stood.

"Beggin' my pardon, sir," Dauchkin said, turning back to face him, "but I think I can help ye with your problem."

He dug into his trousers and pulled out a wrapped bit of what was probably candy and placed it on Captain Montoya's desk.

"What is that?" I demanded.

The old sailor said, "It's a yquaberry lozenge, sir. I make 'em myself. They grow at the edge of the Fire Swamp in Florin. That there will cure the green tide, sir, mark my words!"

The captain took the candy and unwrapped it. The lozenge was a rough lime-colored oval with specks of red in it. He held it up and inspected it, then shifted his gaze to Dauchkin.

I'd heard of yquaberry before. It was rumored to have all sorts of interesting properties, including sobriety and sexual potency and anti-aging properties. They grew in generally inhospitable, unreachable locations—like the Fire Swamp.

It wasn't that I was being overly cautious when I said, "Captain, I wouldn't—" I mean, I'd heard all sorts of tall tales about yquaberry. But what I knew *wasn't* a myth was that an unreasonably large percentage of people couldn't consume them because they often caused fatal allergic reactions.

I'd said, "Captain, I wouldn't—" but it was too late. He'd already popped the lozenge into his mouth.

"I crush 'em and mix 'em with a little lemon n' sugar, sir. Helps with the taste. If I may suggest, sir, suck it slow and be sure to drink plenty o' water after. The green tide'll ebb in no time."

"Thank you, Dauchkin," I said impatiently.

The old man hurriedly saluted and left the captain's quarters.

I gazed at Captain Montoya.

"I've never heard of yquaberry," he murmured lifelessly, the lozenge making his left cheek bulge out. "It's not that bad. Not as far as medicines go … "

I didn't bother to report my fears of him having a fatal allergic reaction to it. It was a mark of how awful he felt that he was willing to try anything, even a potentially fatal poisonous berry, to get better.

"I'll check on you in an hour, sir," I said.

The captain nodded and lowered his head back to his desk and moaned quietly.

I gently closed the door to his quarters behind me.

~~*~~

An hour later I knocked.

There was no answer.

Fearing that Captain Montoya was in the death throes of a fatal allergic reaction to the yquaberry lozenge, I opened the door and peeked inside.

He was lying in his bunk. The smell of vomit had dissipated somewhat.

"Captain?" I said.

He didn't answer.

Had I let the old sailor kill him? *Good God!*

I approached, cautiously reached a hand out over his face.

A warm, regular breath greeted my palm.

"Captain?" I tried again, slightly louder.

He didn't stir.

If I was going to screw up, I would do so on the side of caution. I reached down and pressed the back of my hand to his forehead.

He didn't have a fever. And it was just then that I also noticed something else that he didn't have—a green complexion.

Was the lozenge actually doing him some good? I know he didn't sleep much if at all the past few days; perhaps the nausea had gone away and he had dropped off for some much needed rest. Could it be that simple?

We were still two or three hours from the eastern approach to Dredskull Point. I resolved to check again on him when we dropped anchor. I covered him against the cold fog and left.

~~*~~

I knocked on the door.

"Come in, Paloni!" he shouted.

He sounded like a new man. I opened the door.

He was cleaning that magnificent sword of his. (To use on me—?)

"C-Captain?"

"Bring Dauchkin to me. Right now."

"Y-Yes, sir," I responded. I closed his door and went up the quarterdeck and grabbed the old sailor and returned. After another knock we went in. My sense of self-preservation as strong as ever, I let Dauchkin go first.

"How are you feeling, Captain?" I asked over the old man's shoulder. I noticed he'd put his sword away. A good sign—for both of us.

"Couldn't be better," he said, smiling contentedly. He glanced at Dauchkin and extended his hand, which the old man took.

"Thank you," said Captain Montoya.

One thing that captains do not do is thank their inferiors. It just isn't done. If anything, captainly gratitude is extended with a brief smile or, if the favor was extra special, an extra shot of rum or helping of food.

Dauchkin was speechless.

"Well, man, what have you got to say for yourself?" I demanded, surprised by the force of my outburst.

"M-My pleasure, sir," said Dauchkin, gawking unsurely at me then at the captain.

"Do you have any more of those yquaberry lozenges?" asked Captain Montoya, releasing his hand.

"A whole jarful in me bunkbag, sir," said Dauchkin, nodding quickly.

Captain Montoya glanced at me, said, "I haven't felt this good since I rode off into the sunset after killing Count Rugen!" Then to Dauchkin: "How long do the lozenges last?"

"Hours, sir," said Dauchkin, "more if you drink at least five glasses of water."

"I drank six," said the captain.

"Well, then, sir," said Dauchkin happily and proudly, "you should be right as rain till tomorra. Take another then, sir. Just one at a time'll do ya."

"Do you get seasick, Dauchkin?" I asked.

"No, sir," he replied, "but a few of the crew do. They wouldn' want me to tell you who they are, and I respectfully ask that you don't ask. I have to live with them after all, sir."

I'm certain he didn't approach the captain these past three days out of fear. Taking pity on a pirate captain is a sure way to get thrown overboard. I felt frustration well up and rather cynically said: "I suppose they pay you for them."

"No, sir!" said the old crewman, shocked. "I give 'em away free."

That seemed to impress the captain greatly.

"Double his pay, Paloni.”

Dauchkin blinked. "Thank you, sir!" he cried. "Thank you!"

I think my mouth was hanging open.

"Good deeds should be rewarded," said Captain Montoya.

"Back to your duties, Dauchkin," I said vacantly. "I'll record your new pay in the ledger later."

"And tell the men that if they do good deeds, they'll be rewarded," said the captain. "No man should go through life unappreciated for the good he does for others."

"Yes, sir!" said Dauchkin, who gave as smart a salute as I've ever seen while on this boat. He turned on his heel and marched out of the cabin. Pride fairly radiated off him.

I turned and stared. Captain Montoya was breaking out the moscatel.

Very delicately I said, "Sir, I don't think we can afford to double the crew's salary, not without going broke."

He gave me a big happy grin and then patted my back. "Then it's time we started doing some real plundering, don't you think, Paloni? But first, let's find a way to break out my friend Fezzik."

Chapter 4

Tell a Lie Often Enough ...

THE *REVENGE* is my home, and has been for a long time now. It's where life makes the most sense to me. And so, naturally, I want the very best for this sturdy and swift pirate ship.

Watching Captain Montoya standing at the wheel, fully recovered from his seasickness, I felt sure that I was witnessing the very dawn of the height of the *Revenge*'s glory.

This was the captain the *Revenge* was built for. Oh, the others before him—Westley, Riah, Cummerbund and all the rest … they were excellent in their own way, and this ship suited them and served them well. It made them rich, gave them a name to respect and fear.

But ultimately it was just a tool for them, who in that narrow sense were not fit to captain it. Not permanently in any case.

It was clear that Captain Montoya looked on the *Revenge* less as a ship than a vastly complex organism, one that he made obvious and regular pains to show his gratitude to. They were in a budding partnership together. He would learn from it; someday, hopefully, it would learn from him. It was for that reason, I'm certain, that he showed no reluctance now, having survived the "green tide," to unashamedly ask his crew the simplest questions about the workings of the ship and to have them show him how it all fit together. And the crew … my goodness! After the news of Dauchkin's newly doubled raise went out, they spared no effort to literally show him the ropes, offered with courtesy and respect that the stiffest English officer in Her Majesty's Navy would've found worthy of commendation and compliment.

We got to Dredskull Point and dropped anchor in heavy fog. A light drizzle fell as we met in the crew mess to discuss strategy on how to locate the rock shaped like a skull which pointed the way towards a safe landing. And by "we" I mean everyone: Captain Montoya had invited (not ordered) everyone to contribute if they so desired.

I was still having trouble seeing him in here.

“More minds on the job means more ideas, Paloni,” he had said, misinterpreting the look on my face.

I was shocked when everyone showed up.

“It’ll be weeks, if we find it at all,” I said in the middle of it. I was growing frustrated. “The problem is, guards on the prison towers will spot us long before then. The fog will only last so long.”

A young crewman, brand new, spoke up.

“May I make a suggestion, Captain?” he said unsurely.

“Of course,” said Captain Montoya. “What is your name?”

“Domingo,” said the boy.

That seemed to please the captain greatly. “Domingo,” he said, nodding. “Good Spanish name. Please, Domingo. Go ahead and make your suggestion.”

We all waited as the boy stood and cleared his throat.

“I would like to suggest that Dredskull is a myth. We don’t need to find a low-tide rock that looks like a skull at all. It was a myth started by Rugen and his henchmen. Speak a lie often enough and it becomes the truth. That is my suggestion, sir.”

He sat down.

Dauchkin shook his head.

“I’ve seen the wreckage of boats that have tried to land on Dredskull Point, lad. They’re all around the point. We’re not too far offshore to see them without the fog.”

“I agree,” I said.

But Captain Montoya was smiling at the crewman named Domingo. Smiling and nodding and rubbing his chin.

“Captain?” I inquired, concerned.

He glanced at me, determination in his eyes.

“Count Rugen was a coward and deceiver,” he spat. “He was the king’s henchman before Prince Humperdinck was ever born! He was the one who had Harshtree Prison built!”

“It wouldn’t be difficult to put wrecked ships around the point,” offered a young woman named Ryan, also a new crewmember. “Fill them with the condemned and let the tide pull them in and destroy them.”

“Kill any survivors that make it to shore,” said the bosun with a grim laugh. “Then spread the story about the mortal dangers of Dredskull Point. After all, you’ve already got the skull-shaped rock that appears at low tide. It’s a ready-made story! And old-timers that know it’s all bunk … well, no one’s gonna speak out with that unholy Pit of Despair, now are they?”

“The problem is,” I cut in impatiently, “there’s no way to safely test this theory, is there? So we’re still at square one!”

“This fog ain’t gonna last forever,” observed the bosun. “We may not get an opportunity like this again for a long time. I’ve got plenty of experience with landing on dangerous shores. Captain, I’d like to volunteer to crew a longboat in through the rocks.”

The look on Captain Montoya’s face demonstrated that he clearly knew that he was in charge and that now it was very, very real. Did he have the courage to determine the fate of his crew? This was his first real test, and the galley went totally silent as the men (and women: there were six aboard) watched him. Would he fail?

He stared at the bosun for a long moment, and then at me. I thought he was going to defer to me, to ask what I thought, and prayed he didn’t.

He didn’t. He nodded, first a tiny bit, then more surely.

“We will wait for the tide to go out,” he announced. “That will be sometime tonight, right?” He glanced at me for confirmation.

A nighttime landing at Dredskull Point. In fog!

“Swimmers. Who can swim?” he asked. About half the crew’s hands went up, including the bosun’s.

“Swimmers only. Any volunteers?”

The bosun (his name was Marcell Shya) raised his hand. Surprisingly, six more did as well, of which half were the women!

“Then let’s find a suitable entry point,” said the captain, rising. “And I want to help the longboat people get ready. Thank you all for your help. An extra serving of rum to everyone after dinner.”

This pleased the crew greatly, who thanked the captain as they made their way out of the galley. Soon I was alone with him.

“I want to go with them, Paloni. But I can’t swim.” He gazed at me, determined and frustrated. “I should learn to swim. It seems wrong that the captain of a seagoing vessel can’t swim. Does that seem right to you?”

“I …” But I had been rendered speechless.

“Captain, we need you to stay behind,” I said when I got my voice working. “The *Revenge* needs her captain. As for swimming …” I went to open my mouth again, but knew nothing intelligent was waiting to be uttered, so I closed it.

“Everyone should know how to swim,” he declared. “When we retrieve Fezzik, that’s what we’re going to do. We’re all going to learn how to swim.”

Yep. Speechless.

~~*~~

The *Revenge* has two longboats. We lowered the port one into the sea, which had kicked up slightly with an unsteady onshore breeze. The fog was holding on, but barely. At dusk I suggested that we lower the lights; we all were subsequently fumbling around a bit as we got the boat ready.

“We’re at low tide. Best get a move on,” I said.

Marcell and the other volunteers climbed down the side of the ship into the boat. Captain Montoya was peering over the edge. It was clear he was worried.

“Godspeed. We’ll keep the rum warm for you when you get back,” he said to them with a salute.

The bosun saluted back, gave a grim smile, then ordered the others: “Row. And let’s be cautious and quiet about it, shall we?”

They disappeared slowly into the swirling fog.

“Captain,” I said, “let’s get warm. It’s no use waiting. Pneumonia is a real risk in conditions like these.”

But he shook his head. “I will stay. Go fix me some of that awful tea if you must, but I will not move until they return.”

“I’ll be back with a mug,” I said. “And a coat.”

~~*~~

Two hours passed. I was certain the longboat and the seven aboard it had lost their lives on the fearsome rocks of Dredskull Point, but I didn’t have the heart to suggest it to Captain Montoya. He’d been true to his word and hadn’t moved from his spot. He absentmindedly sipped tea and stared out into the fog. The rest of the crew left him alone.

I was thinking of all the correspondence I was going to have to write to the parents and lovers and children of the deceased. That had been one of my duties in the past, and one I did not relish.

Just then I heard a shout. Then another. I raced out of my quarters to the topdeck. The captain was beaming. The boy, Domingo, had spotted the longboat atop the crow’s nest. They were coming back to the ship!

They’d survived!

“Get blankets, Paloni!” he ordered. “Some may be injured! Let’s be prepared! Hurry!”

Before tearing back below deck, I gawked out into the fog, which in this night air was pea-soup thick. I didn’t see anything.

The rest of the crew was shouting now. I was worried that the guards at Harshtree would hear us. I hurried back up. *“Shhhh!”* I ordered, bringing a stiff index finger to my lips. “You’re barking like a bunch of seals! *Shhhh!*”

Several joined me to help out. We got blankets and first-aid supplies and rushed back up to the topdeck. I looked out.

I couldn’t believe it. There was the longboat not a hundred feet away and closing! The bosun stood at the bow with a wild grin on his stubbly face.

Minutes later we hauled everybody on board. The crew hugged the brave adventurers, and so did the captain, once again abandoning decorum like scurvy.

“Did you land?” he asked with great anticipation in his voice.

“We sure did!” said Marcell. “The boy was right. It’s all a bunch of gull crap! We can land at Dredskull!”

I thought the crew was going to break out in cheers, and I was about to hiss, *“Shhh!”* again, but they only locked arms and danced around in silence and pumped fists into the air.

“There’s something else, Captain,” said Marcell with that wild grin still on his face.

“Well, out with it!” I demanded with a quiet hiss as Captain Montoya turned to listen.

The bosun reached into his trousers pocket and opened his fist to reveal three large, gleaming gold coins.

Everybody immediately stopped dancing and gawked.

“One of the condemned ships they ran into those rocks must’ve been carrying booty of some kind,” he said. “We found these peekin’ out of the sand just under the surfline where we landed!”

Chapter 5

A Great Captain, On the Other Hand ...

THE BOOTY would have to wait. In mid-(silent)-celebration we noticed the fog lifting.

"Get us out of here!" I hissed to the bosun, who hurriedly got the crew busy raising sails and securing the longboat. Suddenly we had two compelling reasons to be here: Fezzik *and* gold. I watched as the captain joined the crew at work, having given the helm to Dauchkin.

Silently the *Revenge* chased the retreating fog. Safely back in it half an hour later, we relaxed a little. The crew gathered in the galley to discuss the gold.

Captain Montoya had the coins displayed on the table. They were from Florin, and at least fifty years old.

"Get your ledger out, Paloni," he ordered. "The longboat crew just earned a raise. And so has our good Domingo here," he motioned towards the young crewman, who looked as proud as a schoolboy. "Anyone who can see through deception with that kind of ease is indispensable.

"Now—" he leaned forward; the crew leaned in too. Their new captain had their complete attention. "–how do we free my friend Fezzik *and* that gold?"

"If it comes to one or the other …" I began.

"We're not leaving Fezzik in that hole," he ordered darkly, staring.

"Understood," I returned. I shouldn't have questioned his priorities. This was a different captain from the rest.

"We'll need double our resources to get both," said Marcell. "Double the manpower, and probably double the time, if not triple."

"Your man on the inside … what's his name?" asked Captain Montoya.

"Bacco," I answered.

"Bacco. Does he know of the gold, you think?"

"I don't think anyone knows of the gold," answered Marcell ahead of me. "Bacco's bright, but he's not a soothsayer!"

"He's a prison overlord, you say?"

We nodded.

“Pay well, overlord?”

We caught his drift right away.

“I don’t know, Captain,” I said. The crew had caught on too. They looked at each other uncertainly. “Bacco is as devious as he is bright. Telling him too soon would be very chancy. If it came to us or the gold, he’d choose …”

“The gold,” I said, along with five or six others, including Marcell.

Captain Montoya looked around at his crew. He took his time, as if plumbing us for courage.

“Captain Westley and Fezzik and I deceived the guards at Humperdinck’s Castle,” he said. “If it worked once, it will work again.”

“What do you propose, Captain?” asked Marcell.

You could hear a pin drop.

The captain gave a determined smile. “I don’t know yet. I need a plan …”

~~*~~

Much later I knocked on his door. I couldn’t sleep. I needed to talk to him—before morning.

I didn’t want to disturb him, and I spent at least half an hour wringing my hands about it. But, I reasoned, as First Mate it’s my duty to keep the captain focused and grounded. That was my rationale for knocking past 2 a.m.

At first there was no noise. He was probably asleep. I could see lamplight peeking out the bottom of the door, however, and that emboldened me to knock again.

“Come in, Paloni,” I heard.

I opened the door.

He was sitting at his desk, pen in hand.

“I do not have the gift for strategy!” he hissed unhappily. “I need … I need the Man in Black! I need Captain Westley!”

He slammed the pen on the papers and dropped his head into his hands.

He looked up. “What are you doing up so late?”

“I couldn’t sleep, Captain,” I explained. “I … I have concerns about … well, I can see you do, too …”

He appeared confused.

“Your plan, sir,” I offered. “I have concerns about it.”

He stared at me, then motioned for me to sit. I did. He poured himself some moscatel and offered me a glass, which I took with thanks.

“I don’t have one,” he said hopelessly after a gulp.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t gotten around to mentioning Captain Westley’s letter. I excused myself to Captain Montoya’s puzzlement, hurried back to my quarters where I retrieved it, then back to his. I handed it to him, and he read it.

He sighed and set it down on the papers he’d been scribbling on.

"I … I have no gift for strategy, Paloni," he repeated. "Captain Westley … in truth, he was the one who planned our castle onslaught. He was our leader, not me."

His gaze was one of great frustration and guilt.

"After our victory tonight finding that gold, I was certain I could be the next Dread Pirate Roberts. I was certain! Now … *I have no gift for strategy, Paloni!*"

He stared helplessly at me. "Tell me. Were the other captains as great a strategist as Captain Westley?"

I didn't know how to answer him. They were all great strategists. I didn't want to depress him more.

"Yes," I said honestly after a moment of indecision. I watched his face fall even more. I did not want to lie to him, and I did not want to sugarcoat the truth, either. A good captain recognizes his strengths *and* his weaknesses. A great captain, on the other hand …

"You have good people crewing this boat," I said. "The other captains, yes, they were marvelous strategists. But to a man they were elitists. The crew were cogs to help them achieve their aims, nothing more. That included, with all due respect, Westley. And that was his, and their, weakness, one I'm not so certain they'd be willing to recognize as such."

He watched me, his face a mask of fatigue and grim determination.

"This crew," I went on, "I've never seen a crew respond more quickly to a new captain before. I do not lie or exaggerate, sir. They are invested in the success of the *Revenge*'s mission. The *Revenge*'s," I emphasized, and shut up. I wanted him to get it on his own.

At first I didn't think he did. He dropped his gaze to his plans and stared dispiritedly at them for a long moment. But then he looked up. A slow smile creased his face.

"You are saying that … that if *I* have no gift for strategy, then someone else on this ship might. Is that what you are saying, Paloni?"

"Or many someones. Yes, that is precisely what I am saying, Captain. That is *your* gift: the ability to lead and inspire men. And if I may be so bold, I daresay it is a much greater gift than being a mere strategist."

He lifted Westley's letter, read it again.

"November is still almost five months off," he observed. He glanced at me.

"Are you saying you want to go to Patagonia, Captain?"

"Not without Fezzik," he said. And without fatigue he added, "And not without that gold!"

~~*~~

"I am captain of the *Revenge*," he told the crew in the galley, who had gathered at first light by his order. "I am your captain. You have been patient with me. And

you have helped me. You have taught me. For these things I am eternally grateful."

He gave a low, solemn bow. The galley was completely silent.

He rose.

"I …" He glanced at me. "… I have no gift for strategy. I do not tell you this to gain your pity. I tell you because—" another glance—"a captain should be honest with his crew. Upon my word, I will always be honest with you. I have no gift for strategy. But I have you. And I am willing to bet that more than one of you has the gift of strategy."

He leaned forward and slammed his fists on the table. Everyone jumped.

"My friend Fezzik is in that prison. He has no gift for strategy either. But he is my friend and I will not lot him rot in there! I need a strategy. I need all of you to help me think of one." He shook his head. "I will not make it an order. I ask you as one person to another. Help me free Fezzik!" He stood up straight and crossed his arms. His crew stared at him as though they were going into battle. "And while we're at it, let's get that damn gold!"

One of the great things about being part of a crew is the camaraderie that develops. The men and women of the *Revenge* felt it then as surely as I did. They rose as one and cheered. I did, too.

Chapter 6

Preparing for the Assault

TEN YEARS. That's how long I've been a crewmember on the *Revenge*. I've seen some wild things in that time, and have been part of some crazy moments as we plundered and robbed our way to a reputation that echoes today over the Seven Seas.

But nothing like this. I was convinced this mission was suicide and that we were all going to our doom. Captain Montoya must have sensed it (I thought I was hiding it well; I had no intentions of putting a damper on the morale of the crew, which was as high as I'd ever seen it), because on the day we were to put our initial plans in play, he stopped me.

"There is no point in hiding it, Paloni," he said quietly. "I can see it in your eyes."

"See what, sir?" I asked, trying to act surprised that he'd see anything but steely resolve.

He shook his head. "There is no need to fence with me. All the years of learning to be a swordmaster, one learns one lesson above all others: the strategy of one's opponent can be found in his eyes, not in his feet or his blade." He let that sink in, then said: "Tell me what is troubling you."

But what could I say that would be worthy of a First Mate of the *Revenge*? This truly was the dawn of this ship's golden age. If I knew anything, it was that, and so I composed myself and answered, "I want to be worthy of this ship, sir. I do not want to let the men down; and I do not want to let you down."

The swordmaster gazed deeply into my eyes, then smiled. "I am fortunate to have you by my side, Paloni. You have taught me much. Perhaps it is time I teach you something. Come," he said, putting a hand on my shoulder, "it is time to go."

If this was suicide, so be it. We are the *Revenge*, known and feared over the Seven Seas. It was time to increase the sound of that echo, or to die trying.

~~*~~

Here was the plan:

Half of us would crew longboats into the point to retrieve the gold after the

Revenge returned from Taurdust, the closest port to Harshtree, just twelve miles up the coast. Taurdust (pronounced DOW-er-dust) was, fortunately, friendly to the *Revenge*, a forgotten little enclave popular with retired pirates and thieves. One would think that such a populace would raise hell day in and day out, but that would be incorrect. Taurdust was as sleepy a hamlet as existed anywhere. Retired pirates and thieves tend to be very picky about their quiet.

That was Marcell's contribution to the plan, because he was best buddies with one such retired pirate up there, a chap named Sam Racer, who he said could hook us up with horses and a cart and someone to modify it to look like a prison paddywagon.

We argued spiritedly about who should take it to Harshtree, and how many should go. It was one of the women—Hindy was her name—who got us to agree that more than five would rouse suspicion. Two would drive the wagon, and three would be "prisoners" in the back. Dangerous doesn't begin to describe it. We would need our five best swordsmen and –women. Another argument ensued over who qualified. The captain quelled that one quickly, though, by announcing that he would test everyone's skill to determine who should go. And then he caused the biggest uproar of all by telling us that he would be one of the five.

Try as we might (and, of course, with the appropriate respect shown at all times), we couldn't budge him. Westley had warned me: *Give that man a Purpose and the drink will be forgotten until that Purpose is fulfilled.* That's what his letter had said. I hadn't taken it as a warning. Perhaps I should've.

"Your face is famous all over Florin, Captain," I'd tried as a last-ditch effort to talk him out of going. "The guards at Harshtree will take one look at you and know who you are."

Hindy had the answer for that. "Not if he looks like a hooker he won't."

All heads snapped around. There were shouts of outrage: "The captain of the *Revenge* dressed as a *hooker?*" "In all my years of piratin', I have never—" "Twenty lashes! That's what they used to give suggestions like that in the olden days!" Hindy shrank in her seat—until she glanced at Captain Montoya, who was grinning approvingly. He held his hand up to quiet the commotion, then said, "Please let her speak. What is your name?"

"Hindy," said Hindy. She shook her head emphatically, "No disrespect offered, sir. None, I promise you …"

The captain shook his head. "None taken. Please, expound on your idea."

"Hookers are sometimes brought into Harshtree for prisoners who display good behavior. They're called 'carrots.' Sometimes carrots are brought in for condemned men—men who are to be hanged the next day. There's a private room with a bed."

She stopped talking, lowered her eyes. No one asked how she knew this

information.

An uncomfortable silence pervaded the proceedings. She broke it with: “You’ll need to shave your moustache, Captain, of course …”

“Of course,” said the captain, grinning. He twisted one end of it. “I’ve had this since I was a young man …”

“Captain, I’m sure we can think of another plan—” offered Marcell.

But Captain Montoya shook his head. “No. This is perfect, provided you can make me look like a ‘carrot.’ ” He stared at Hindy. “Can you do that?”

Her smile was one of relief. “I think so, sir.”

Several of the other women spoke up. “We can help,” they said.

“Very good,” said the captain. “Now: let’s talk about weapons. At some point we’re going to need them. Can we sneak our swords in there somehow?”

And we were off and planning some more.

The captain of the *Revenge*—dressed as a hooker, a carrot!

~~*~~

That was five with the paddywagon and thirteen digging up the gold on the point. We were fortunate: low tide would come just after midnight the night the assault was to take place, which meant the diggers would have access to the bit of beach where the first coins were discovered. That left six to crew the *Revenge*. Those were hardly the castoffs with no real role to play; we’d need crewmen and -women with superb sailing skills who could get our beloved ship out of harm’s way if it came to that, or fight if need be.

But that would have to wait. On the morning of the third day of planning we gathered on the main deck in a large circle around the captain. He held wooden training swords.

I was the first to be motioned into the circle. He handed me the trainer. “On your mark, Paloni,” he said, assuming a fighter’s stance. “You say when.”

One of the crew off to the left held a stopwatch; another next to him readied a clipboard and quill and served as the referee. I glanced at them, then back at the captain. I took a deep breath.

“Ready,” I said. I heard the stopwatch click.

According to the crewmember holding it, I lasted four and a quarter seconds. That’s how long it took Captain Montoya to disarm me.

The crew’s mouths all hung open.

Four and a quarter bloody seconds! I picked up the trainer from the deck, my own mouth hanging open, and handed it to Marcell, who shut his and took it nervously.

Marcell did nothing nervously.

He lasted two seconds flat. He hadn’t been disarmed, but “stabbed” in the chest. He stared down at the wooden blade poking perfectly into his sternum.

“Son of a bitch,” he grunted.

He gave the captain a bow and, smiling and shaking his head, handed the trainer to Domingo, who didn’t even lift the damn thing before it flew out of his hand.

Captain Montoya gave the boy an understanding pat on the shoulder when he slunk back to the circle.

The crew eventually stopped being silent with astonishment and started cheering each who stepped in, giving them encouragement. We tried to distract the captain with lighthearted teasing: “Spaniard on deck! Hide the booze!” “Think you’ll get a boyfriend at Harshtree, Captain? He’ll look *pretty!*” “Who’s green and mean and jumps like a bean?” (Referring, of course, to his spate of seasickness and Mexican jumping beans, which made him chuckle and shake his head. It didn’t help.)

Now here’s the surprising thing. My time—four and quarter seconds, was fourth best out of everybody, which meant I was going to accompany the paddywagon strike team.

What was most surprising, though, was that the three ahead of me were women, including Hindy, whose full half minute in the circle brought a loud round of applause from everyone, including the captain, who, after his bow to her, said, “Where did you learn to use a sword? You are marvelous!”

“My father taught me,” she replied. “I would love to watch you two spar.”

“He is obviously of the first caliber,” said Captain Montoya. “I applaud him that he went against tradition and trained his daughter.”

“Daughters were all he had,” she said with a pride-filled grin.

The two other women who bested my time also had training by their fathers—one a Florinian miller and another an ex-pirate whose wife had died giving birth to her. The crew gave us a hearty round of applause.

“Well, that takes care of making the captain look like a carrot,” grunted Marcell, “but it leaves us with the problem of making two women look like men!”

“There’s another problem,” I observed. “What if those on the strike team are needed here to protect the ship?”

But that was an empty problem. Marcell was as good as a sailor as lived; it was a simple matter for him to point out five others to help him crew. “I’ll map out the approach to the point to those going in to retrieve the gold,” he announced. “It isn’t as difficult as legends would have it. A little care and attention will see y’all safely to shore. Now back to the original problem. Those men sitting in that infernal prison will smell a woman from half a mile off! We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

We did. Our women crew did not look mannish, not one of them. As tough as they were, all of them had strong feminine features. They defied conventions and

expectations, and for that had been rejected by their communities. They had found a home on the *Revenge*; and all of them were invaluable in their own way.

"Trifles," said Captain Montoya with a determined smile. "We have our assignments, and we have our plan. It is time to put flesh and bones on it! Let's go!"

~~*~~

We sailed in to Taurdust the following afternoon. Sam Racer met us at the dock, his sons in tow. They were large, burly men who helped stock the ship later, and who helped us find a suitable paddywagon in a neighboring junkyard.

The following morning we spoke to Racer's neighbor, an ex-guard at Harshtree, unbelievably, who was more than happy to help us out.

"Thirty-seven years on the job at that shithole, and they take my pension away on some trumped-up charge! You bet I'll help you!"

It took four days of back-breaking sunup-to-sundown work, but as the last light of day four drained away, we stood and stared at Harshtree's newest prison paddywagon, along with twenty-two brand new wooden training swords.

"After we learn to swim, we will learn to fight!" declared the captain, who thanked the ex-guard for making them before paying him handsomely.

The crew, Sam Racer, his sons, and the ex-guard celebrated at the local tavern, where our boisterousness was met with disapproving frowns from the locals; but the tavern owner loved us and didn't interrupt. By the time we stumbled out of there well after midnight he'd probably made an entire season's worth of tips. We're not rich, certainly, those proud lot of us of the *Revenge*, but we're not poor either. Besides, it had been a long time since we'd let loose.

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We of the strike team waved the *Revenge* off the following morning—the day we would rescue Fezzik from Harshtree. We watched as her sails unfurled and she sailed out of sight.

We had all day to get ready and to recover from our hangovers. Our planned assault would take place at precisely eleven-thirty p.m.; that's when our paddywagon would pull up to the prison's imposing gates. Eleven o'clock was when the guards changed shifts and the skeleton crew showed up, cutting the guard presence in half. We figured we had less than that—half an hour—to rescue Fezzik and be a good, safe distance back along the road before Florin's authorities were alerted to what was happening and overwhelmed us. At the very minimum, we'd need to be out of the impassable forest. It seemed doable since we would have the four horses drawing the paddywagon, which we'd abandon, and perhaps more from the prison stables, though it would be foolish to count on them.

Eleven-thirty was also when the team of golddiggers were to land and begin their work. Once we struck, the retired guard informed us, those manning the

parapets would almost certainly come to the rescue of their comrades and try to stop us, even though their orders required them to remain at their posts. If that happened, and if the night was as dark as it had been the previous week, they'd not spot the diggers. Boredom was rampant among the guards at Harshtree, he told us, and so lax discipline had set in, not to mention corruption and other issues. Inspections of Harshtree by Florin officials were rare, fewer than twice a year, and always on the same dates. Harshtree's administrators had grown as soft as their guards. All of these things would hopefully work in our favor.

As would Bacco. That is, again, hopefully. *Very* hopefully. Bacco, I had to admit, was a wild card. His interests and ours very well might conflict.

"Profit," I told the captain as Crissah, one of the women on the strike team, shaved his moustache. (We'd decided to shave it anyway to alter his appearance.) "That's his interest. That's his *only* interest. What profits him, what gets him ahead, what serves his purpose, what enriches him. If he thinks he can become richer by having us captured or killed than by helping us free Fezzik, he'll do it without blinking an eye."

Captain Montoya frowned. "He was once a crewmember?"

I nodded.

"He seems more trouble than he's worth, Paloni."

I nodded again, this time unsurely. "The real problem with Bacco is that for every negative you can find with him, you also get an equal and opposite positive. He has proven invaluable to the crew in the past, which is why previous captains didn't hang him from the mainmast or cast him overboard. If he once again proves useful, I'd advise strong caution in dealing with him. He is smart and cunning. *Very* smart. Don't be afraid to use your blade, if for no other reason than to establish who's boss. He's an opportunist. He can spot weakness and indecision a mile off."

"Thank you, Paloni," said the captain. "I appreciate the heads-up. I do not fear snakes. Will he be there?"

"As I understand it, he lives in the prison."

Unfortunately, Captain Montoya didn't look much different without the moustache as I'd hoped. His strong, dark features were unmistakable. We settled on a tattered scarf to put on his head, and bandages to wrap his neck up to his chin and mouth. We "guards" would report that he'd been injured before his arrest.

The irons and chains for him and I were fake and easily breakable; and as for weapons, they were in a hidden drawer under the paddywagon and easily accessible once the receiving guards had been overcome. Of those, Hindy told us, there would be two. They'd be heavily armed, and that was a problem, and they'd need to be silenced before they got a chance to yell, another problem. A third was Hindy. If she was recognized she might bring the entire assault to a screeching

halt. It all depended on who the receiving guards were. For that reason we chose the visiting carrot to be Crissah, who'd be armed with a dagger secured by a garter.

I had to admit she looked very alluring. We men, including Sam Racer's sons, gawked openly when she emerged from the room with her guards, Hindy and Emeri, both who, at least from across the room, looked passably male.

"The carrot rides with the prisoners?" asked the captain.

Hindy nodded darkly. "Yes. If she's touched the guards can execute the prisoners before they even arrive. It isn't uncommon for paddywagons to arrive carrying only the carrot. Many condemned line the road into Harshtree. It's quite gruesome."

"I doubt the guards bother being judicious," I snorted. "How many of those dead along the road never touched the carrot, I wonder?"

"A fair few, no doubt," said Hindy. "You'll need to prepare yourself. The road into Harshtree is awful."

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We left at nine-thirty. Hindy and Emeri drove the paddywagon; the captain and Crissah and I rode in the back. The going was bumpy at first as we left Taurdust, but then, surprisingly, leveled out. With the sliver of a setting new moon lighting the way, the tangled and impenetrable mass of Harshtree Forest loomed higher and higher into the sky, shutting out the silver light. Half an hour into our journey, the moon had set and the first boughs glided overhead. Soon we were riding in pitch blackness with only an oil lamp to each side of the paddywagon illuminating the rutted road ahead. The lead horses were just visible and seemed to know the way.

Crissah pointed. At the side of the road to our left was a pair of skeletons, one partially lying on top of another. Soon more skeletons followed, and corpses too, and the odor of decomposing flesh and stale rot. It was all designed, she told us, to rob prisoners of hope and to terrify them. Harshtree was the end of the line. There would be no escape.

We arrived a few minutes ahead of schedule. The giant gates of the prison towered over us, just visible from torches on the parapets and our own lamps, as well as a paddywagon just ahead of us.

The ex-guard warned us this might happen. He told us not to interact with other paddywagons' guards; apparently Harshtree's guards made a commission for bringing in the condemned, and it wasn't unheard of for one set of guards to mug another to get it. The best way to avoid a confrontation, he said, was to refuse to talk to them, which we did. They gazed in at the captain and me and Crissah, who they looked over with obvious lust.

"When you're done, I think I'll take a piece," said one, reaching in and giving

her thigh a squeeze.

I thought the captain might move; it was obvious he wanted to protect her. Crissah, for her part, played the part marvelously.

"I don't come cheap, honey," she said sweetly. "A week's wage should do it." She stroked his filthy hand, then gently removed it from her leg.

Carrots were paid well by prison admins to come to Harshtree. That was another invaluable tidbit the ex-guard shared with us. Another was that guards who assault a carrot become condemned prisoners themselves, though due to corruption, that happened much less often, which probably accounted for the guard's smirk. "We'll see about that," he said, and removed his arm from between the bars.

There was a loud, low clunking noise, and then the gates of Harshtree opened like the gates into Hell. The guard went to rejoin his paddywagon, which preceded us inside. I watched as the gates behind us closed.

We were inside Harshtree Prison.

Chapter 7

The Assault to Free Fezzik

AN IN-HOUSE guard removed the prisoners in the paddywagon ahead of us. There were three prisoners: two older men and a teenager who appeared terrified to the point of wetting himself.

We watched the guards around us carefully, how they conducted business. Those with the paddywagon did, literally, nothing. One of them remained with the wagon, where he sipped lifelessly from a silver flask; the other, the one who accosted Crissah, eventually mumbled, “I gotta take a crap,” and left.

The great gates to the prison swung closed, the guards outside locking us in. It was up to Bacco to open them when the time came.

The guard handling the prisoners did so with the expected brutality, yanking them out by their shackles and waving a broadsword in their faces. “You make no trouble here, maybe we’ll feed ya once a day. Make trouble here, and you can rot in your cell for all we care. Understand?”

The old men nodded resignedly; the teen whimpered, his eyes wide. The guard saw this and smashed his free fist into the boy’s face, who fell in a heap on the ground.

“Get up! Get up!” bellowed the guard. “Get up or die where you lie!”

The boy struggled to his feet. His mouth was a river of blood. He crouched, ready for another hit. The guard laughed, as did the one on the wagon, who saw that all was well in hand and stalked off.

“Ain’t you a pathetic one. You’ll serve the bulls well,” the one handling him growled. “You’ll be their little carrot.” He acted like he was going to strike him again, making the boy fall again, at which point he threatened to cut off the boy’s head unless he was standing again in “two seconds! An’ the first one just passed!”

The kid scampered to his feet, his eyes wet with horrified tears, his mouth running red. He had indeed peed himself; I hoped the guard didn’t notice. He didn’t. Instead he snarled at them: “Youse three stand right there. If ya move, ya eat me blade!”

He came towards us.

He reached for the lock, jammed his key in it, jiggered it with increasing frustration, then angrily yanked it out. “Damn rusted lock!”

“Here, I’ve got it,” said Hindy, who jumped off the driver’s side and came up behind him. She put her key in the lock as the guard, eyeing her, said, “You ain’ familiar.”

She kept her face pointing away from him. In as deep and gruff a voice she could manage, she said, “Just do your job, why doncha?” She pulled the lock open.

He dropped a big, meaty paw on her shoulder. “Youse a little small to be a guard, aintcha?”

She turned to face him.

Her face was the last thing he ever saw. She withdrew her dagger from his chest as he collapsed at her feet. Incredibly, no other guards saw this; they had all left! Hindy pulled the paddywagon’s doors open. “Get him under the wagon! They won’t see him there!”

We piled out. Crissah freed her garter-strapped dagger with one smooth motion as she leapt through. The three prisoners standing next to the paddywagon ahead of us gawked, speechless. As we got the body under the wagon, one of the old men rasped, “Free us! Free us!”

The captain tore off his bandages and kicked the paddywagon’s bottom ledge. The force released a spring and a thin drawer flew open, in which were our swords. He grabbed the magnificent blade that was his, and threw us ours. “Before the guards get back,” he whispered fiercely, “free the boy!”

Hindy collected the keys from the dead guard and tossed them at me. I caught them and bolted around the wagon to the boy, who gaped as I approached. I hurriedly jammed candidate keys into the lock hanging across his chest. I was third-key lucky. The lock released and the kid threw off his chains.

“Th-Thank you,” he said. He spat blood at his feet.

“Shhhhhh!” Emeri motioned a stiff finger to her lips. *“Someone is coming!”*

Indeed, we heard footsteps sound out in an adjacent hallway. The problem was, this staging area had many hallways, all of them dark. The approaching guard could be coming from any of them.

“Free us!” whispered the men. “Free us and we’ll help you fight!”

The boy turned to me, his face one of frightened outrage. *“Don’t!”* he hissed as quietly as he could. “They robbed my family and killed my mother and framed me for it! They got caught trying to rob another family! Free them and you’re freeing killers!”

“Free us or we’ll call out!” threatened one. “And then where will you—”

Emeri came unnoticed up behind them and with the pommel of her sword

knocked the speaker unconscious. Her blade flicked in the face of the other before he could blink. “Corner,” she ordered. “Move. *Quickly!*”

The man grunted and clinked his way to the nearest corner, which was shrouded in darkness under the guard balcony overhead. He no longer looked as he did getting out of the paddywagon—a put-upon older man who just couldn’t understand what he’d done to deserve this grim fate—but had transformed into a hardened killer angling for an advantage. He went to say something cruel and threatening, I’m certain, but Emeri slammed the pommel into his temple before he could start, and he dropped in a heap at her feet.

Captain Montoya approached the boy, extra sword in hand. “Die here in fear,” he said, offering the weapon to him, which the boy took unsurely, “or live out there in freedom. Fight alongside me and you may join my crew.”

“Wh—Who are you?” asked the kid.

“That’s the Dread Pirate Roberts,” said Hindy hurrying by, who added in a fierce whisper, *“The corners! We’ve got seconds!”*

The kid gawked. He did so for only the briefest moment, but in that glance I could see all his childhood fantasies flare to glorious life. With him in tow, we jammed ourselves into the corner nearest the corridor we thought the sounds of the bootsteps were coming from and waited.

The guard came through—the one who had gone to the bathroom. He looked around. He saw Crissah.

“What the hell—?” he yelled.

Her dagger flickered silver and gold in the dim light as she swung it up and around for his neck. He grabbed her arm before the blade could connect and yanked her into his broad chest. His smirking eyes crossed and he dropped unconscious to the hay-strewn ground still holding her arm. He fell half on top of her; I helped pull her free. I had slammed the pommel of my sword into his skull; I held the blade up, listening, as did the others.

We heard nothing save what was probably the muffled and distant snoring of dozens of prisoners down darkened halls. The guard’s yell hadn’t alerted anyone.

We hurriedly bound and gagged him and the other guard. We hauled them to the same corner as the killers and dropped hay on all of them, hiding them. Seven minutes had passed since the assault had begun.

Harshtree Prison was essentially a three-story rectangular box with a central courtyard over a dungeon. Where we were, the staging area, gave no indication whatsoever where we should start.

As it turned out, we didn’t really have much of a choice. All other ground-floor entrances leading to the cells were welded shut. The captain and Emeri and I hurried around to find out if any weren’t. The only one open to us was the one the guard had walked out of. I glanced down at its lock.

“It’s broken,” I noted. “No one has ever replaced it. This gate is permanently open!”

“I will lead,” said Captain Montoya. “Hindy, you’re right behind me. Two by two. A little space between each group. Paloni, where’s this Bacco?”

“Probably asleep,” I said.

“Do you know where the administrators sleep?” he asked.

“I do,” said Hindy.

“We need Bacco to help us find Fezzik,” I said. “We don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Enough talk!” hissed Crissah, who had ripped her skirt up past her knees to give her legs freedom to move, and to keep cloth from getting in the way. “Let’s go!”

Very cautiously, we stepped into the hallway.

“How long till the guards rotate?” asked the captain. “What did that ex-guard tell us again?”

“Twenty-five minutes by the clock,” she said. “Which means—” she pulled out a small fob watch from her brassiere and checked it—“we’ve got just over sixteen minutes before all hell breaks loose in here.”

I brought up the rear with the boy, who was so scared he was visibly shaking. “Come,” I said, taking a sure grip on his arm. He goggled at me. “Hold your sword like this—” I held mine up in a protective gesture. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Wh-Why are you here?” he asked.

“We’re saving a friend of the captain’s,” I answered as we hurried up the hallway.

“That’s really the Dread Pirate Roberts?”

“It really is.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Then don’t.”

He didn’t know what to say. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Rye,” he said. “Rye M-Morgny.”

“Tell you what, Rye Morgny,” I said, “I’ll do everything I can to make sure you don’t die, if you do everything in yours to make sure I don’t. Deal?”

“D-Deal.”

He’d lowered his sword again. I motioned again with mine.

The hallway ended at a T-intersection. Left was a short corridor that opened into a long balcony with cells to the right after fifty feet or so. Snoring came from that direction. To the right was another corridor, this one leading to stairs. A wooden sign hanging from the ceiling at their foot read: “CONSTABULARY.”

We hurried up them.

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We stood in an office. A short hallway led off to the left, dark and threatening. An adjacent one, at a right angle to it, had various signs over closed doors.

"How many administrators sleep here?" the captain asked.

No one had an answer.

"Then we take one hostage and force him to tell us where Bacco is. Hindy, let's go."

The captain and Hindy hurried to the first door down the dark hallway. It was on the left. Hindy grasped the doorknob, turned it. It wasn't locked. They disappeared inside.

A muffled groan issued from it. Ten seconds passed. The administrator appeared, Hindy's sword at his bare back.

"D-Down here," he grunted. "He's this one. Now please—" he turned to look at Hindy—"please just let me—"

He fell unconscious to the floor. Captain Montoya, responsible for the man's condition, looked down at him, then hurried to the indicated door.

And hell, which wasn't supposed to break loose for another thirteen minutes, decided to get an early jump on the action.

Two guards suddenly came bellowing up the stairs at the same moment that two administrators threw open their doors, weapons at the ready. The admins were dressed ridiculously in bedclothes, but it was obvious that they were grizzled veterans of violence and didn't give a damn how they looked.

I pushed the kid aside to protect him. The guards (one of them had been with the first paddywagon) were closest to me. They saw me and bullrushed me.

Crissah was at my side instantly, dagger in one hand, sword in the other. The guards caught her feminine figure for just a moment, long enough for me to strike. I felled the first with relative ease. The second went after Crissah, bellowing, "ALERT! ALERT! WE'RE BEING ATTACKED! *ALERT!*"

Crissah parried his onrush expertly, stepping out of the way with a vicious downstroke that left him bleeding from his sword hand. Another stroke cut the hand off completely. He stared at it lying at his feet while shrieking at the top of his lungs before she drove her dagger into his neck like an angry, swooping wasp. He fell to the ground gurgling.

The other administrators were dead as well. They had seen Hindy and Emeri, but not the finest swordmaster in the land, who withdrew his blade from the back of one before turning and sweeping into the room where Bacco was supposed to be.

Rye Morgny had peed himself again. He cowered in a darkened corner and cried, *"I can hear more coming! More are coming!"*

"Hindy! Emeri!" I called. "Check those two doors!" Were there administrators behind them, just waiting for their chance?

We no longer bothered trying to be quiet; Emeri, with a hard kick, busted the first door open, then shouted: "Empty!"

Hindy did the same to the second, but she said, "It's storage! No one's in here!"

Captain Montoya emerged from the third seconds later, Bacco leading at swordpoint. The captain's eyes were wide as saucers. He said, "This is Bacco? No! No! It *can't* be! *This is ... Vizzini!*"

"I … I *told* you already, I'm Vizzini's *identical twin brother!*" cried Bacco, obviously scared out of his mind. "I'm not Vizzini; he's dead! *He's dead!*"

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Everyone on the *Revenge* had heard of Vizzini. He was the little pimple who had taken a commission by Prince Humperdinck to kidnap and kill Buttercup, who at that time was the prince's lukewarm fiance. It had all gone along swimmingly until Inigo Montoya, who with the giant Fezzik Vizzini had hired to help carry out his dastardly deed, noticed a singleship in hot pursuit, which was captained by none other than the previous Dread Pirate Roberts, Captain Westley. Inigo Montoya, already a very skilled swordsman, was bested by Captain Westley, whom Montoya referred to as "The Man in Black." No one knew, including us, his crew, that Captain Westley and Buttercup had a history, that they were in love. Westley, just like that, was gone. We had no idea where he had gone off to, or why. When we heard of the downfall of Prince Humperdinck (who was killed in this very prison not long after), we knew. "The Man in Black," our captain, had killed Vizzini on his way to rescuing Buttercup. Bacco, who was crewing on the *Revenge* at the time, never told us that he had a brother, let alone an identical twin.

It all clicked for me then. Had Vizzini been successful with his plans, Bacco would have sold out the *Revenge* in the tumult sure to follow as Florin and Guilder prepared for all-out war. There was almost certainly no other reason why we didn't know of Vizzini's existence!

"You ass boil!" I shouted, and advanced on him.

Bacco's eyes widened as I drew near.

"Stand down, Paloni," ordered the captain. "We need him."

"Only long enough to find out where Fezzik is!" I roared. Hindy and Emeri nodded agreement. They too looked like they were ready to skewer him, even though they hadn't been on the *Revenge* when Vizzini was alive.

"That doesn't give me much of a reason to tell you which cell he's in then, does it?" simpered Bacco.

Captain Montoya gave him a dark grin, then shined it my way. "Paloni, cut off his hand."

"Gladly," I said, and raised my sword.

"All right! All right!" cried Bacco. "He's in cell 24! Cell 24! I swear!"

“More are coming!” yelled Rye Morgny from the stairwell. “I can hear them!”

“Where’s cell 24?” demanded the captain. “Where are the keys to free him?”

“I’ll take you there,” squeaked Bacco. “I can guarantee your safety. I—I’ve got the keys. They’re in my room. Let me get them. *Ouch!*”

I had stuck the point of my sword in his Adam’s apple. A bead of blood formed on his neck, ran down it.

“Take him, Paloni, and make haste,” ordered Captain Montoya. “For each trick he tries to play, or that you suspect he is playing, remove one of his fingers.”

“Hurry!” cried Rye. *“Hurry!”*

“Move,” I snarled. Bacco turned and scurried back into his room, my sword poking into the back of his neck.

I was sorely tempted to kill him right there, and to hell with the consequences. That’s how angry I was. Bacco had made some excuse after Prince Humperdinck had been arrested and charged with treason; he had disembarked at the very next port we put in at, as I recall, hurrying off the boat ahead of the rest of the crew and disappearing like the rat he was. We had all thought it odd at the time, but had discounted it almost immediately. Bacco was odd. It was who he was. We expected nothing more of him, and so forgot the incident forthwith.

He rushed to his desk, just visible in the dark, and grabbed a ring of keys. “I can guarantee your safety,” he said, “but only if you take me with you.”

I brought my sword down on the ring, which slammed back down on the desk. The blade was tantalizingly close to his middle finger.

“You won’t survive without me, Duncan,” he said snakily. “There are guards sympathetic to your cause. I knew you would come. They are willing to look the other way—provided, of course, that *I* signal them. If *I* don’t signal them, you won’t make it out of here. The guards at the entrance gate are sympathizers. But unless *I* signal them, you’ll never leave this place alive.”

I’m no swordmaster like the captain, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how to handle a blade. I flicked the tip of it into his finger and gave it a nice cut. He dropped the keys and I fed my blade through the ring and flipped them to my free hand.

“Signal the guards,” I said, just able to hold on to my temper, “ and you get to live. Don’t signal the guards, or give them the wrong signal, and this prison is your tomb. *I’ll* see to it personally. Move it.”

Bacco, middle finger in his mouth, scampered out of his bedroom.

Guards were at the stairwell.

“To the front,” I ordered Bacco. “Give the signal.”

We pushed him to the landing. The guards rushed up the stairs, broadswords at the ready. They stopped when they saw him.

He gave them a single nod. Glaring, they turned and descended out of sight.

We followed Bacco down the stairs into the dark hallway. Rye Morgny was in the middle of our group, his sword held protectively as I showed him. He was a liability, no doubt about it; but I wasn't about to leave him to the grim fate of this prison. He reminded me of myself when I was his age, which couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

Hindy had taken control of Bacco. She had shackled his wrists behind his back from a pair she found in storage. Bacco went to complain, and then to leer, at her, but a swift and shallow cut along his cheek silenced him. He was bleeding from at least three minor wounds and complained bitterly about how he was being treated.

I don't know how he had arranged Fezzik's escape with one set of guards and not another. Something didn't smell right. I was about to ask when we came upon the first of the cells. Some of the inmates had woken; they stared silently at us from the gloom within them. I thought they might make a lot of noise, but none of them spoke. I thought of the guards again, and what they had probably done to them. I didn't doubt if many of them had no tongues in their mouths. In any case, all of them were malnourished and hopelessness reigned in their eyes. I felt badly for them—even knowing that some, perhaps most, of them were actual criminals: killers and kidnappers and rapists.

"Here," grumbled Bacco.

"Fezzik? Fezzik, are you in there?" asked the Captain frantically. *"Fezzik!"*

We couldn't see inside the cell. But then a tremendous face emerged from the gloom, pressed itself to the bars.

"Inigo," said the giant. "My friend …"

The captain was speechless, and I knew why. His friend looked like a great big skeleton. It was obvious he was starving. When the captain spoke, his voice was choked with rage.

"Keys," he said.

I handed them to him.

"Which key is it?" he asked menacingly. He didn't look at Bacco; and when Bacco hesitated for half a second, Captain Montoya's blade, as though with a mind of its own, flicked out and up, too fast to follow, and cut off the lower third of the lobe of his right ear. The flesh flew through the dark and stuck to the blocks next to Fezzik's cell.

"That one! The one you're holding!" shrieked Bacco, whose ear bled freely down his neck. Captain Montoya placed the key into the lock and turned it. The lock released with a loud click, and we hurried to open the cell door, which squeaked and groaned loudly.

"Can you walk?" asked the captain of his friend. "Do you need help?"

"I will be all right," said Fezzik. His accent was heavy and unknown to me, and I had trouble understanding him. "I am hungry, Inigo."

“I know, I know, my friend,” said the captain. “We will eat the moment we’re away from here and safe from capture. Come, come …”

Fezzik emerged fully from his cell, and I shrank within myself. He truly was a giant. I felt even more outrage overcome me: there was no way he could’ve been comfortable in that confined space.

“Captain,” I said, “I submit to you that this little piece of rotting meat be held accountable for what has happened to Fezzik.” I glared at Bacco, who looked completely put out, as though he had no idea what I was going on about.

“He’s alive because of *me!*” he spat. “I saw to it that he got extra rations! He’d be *dead* were it not for me!”

“We don’t have time to argue,” insisted Hindy. “It’s obvious we’re being allowed to be here; but I don’t doubt that the Florin authorities have been notified. It would be in this snake’s best interest if they were!”

“Agreed,” Emeri and I said at the same time. Rye Morgny simply stood there, gawking.

“Fezzik, after you …” said the captain. “Paloni, see to the administrator. Run him through at the first sign of trouble.”

“If you do that, you’ll die in here!” hissed Bacco, pressing his bloody ear into his shoulder.

The captain was suddenly in his face, sword point poking into his chin. “I do not fear death! If today I die freeing Fezzik, then I died in a noble pursuit. Are you ready to die with me?”

Bacco had no answer, or was too terrified to give one. Captain Montoya held his icy gaze on him for a moment, and once again I felt a thrill shoot through me, one that told me unequivocally that I was a full participant in the golden age of the *Revenge*. This captain was nothing short of spectacular.

We hurried back through the dark hallway. Not a peep came from the inmates as they watched us pass. Probably the entire prison was watching, or trying to watch, what was happening, but none dared call out. That’s how oppressive and horrible this place was.

We got to the stairs and hurried down them, then ran through the hall to the gate with the broken lock. Back in the staging area, we released the horses from our paddywagon, then did the same to those on the one that preceded us inside. It took some doing getting Fezzik on a horse; we had chosen the largest one for him; and now it looked like a mere pony. I had no idea how it could handle his mass.

Captain Montoya insisted Bacco ride with him. With everyone mounted (Hindy and Emeri shared a steed; Rye got his own), Bacco gave his signal, which involved a complex whistle. It was loud, but I doubted it was loud enough to be heard through those huge, thick gates, and said as much. Once again I suspected a trap, and glanced nervously around. But nothing happened. Instead the gates

creaked, then cracked open.

We held up. Indeed, it was a trap. At least fifteen guards and a dark man in a cloak waited just outside. He spied the captain and chuckled menacingly. “Well, well,” he said. “Inigo Montoya, isn’t it? Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Dynatis Rugen. My father was the Count Rugen of Florin. You slaughtered him, and I am here to slaughter you.”

Bloody Bacco was grinning.

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Dynatis Rugen dismounted, withdrew his sword. “At my command,” he said, “kill all of them except the administrator.”

He raised his blade. Archers surrounding us pulled back on their arrows, and swords came up at the ready.

At that moment the three guards standing in front of him dropped to the ground dead, arrows protruding from their bodies.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” a voice called out from the impenetrable forest. “You’re surrounded. Drop your weapons now, NOW!—”

“Kill them all!” shouted Dynatis Rugen, who had backed up a dozen paces and appeared ready to run for safety. *“Kill them now!”*

It all happened in the blink of the eye. Hindy and Emeri jumped off their steeds, swords at the ready; Crissah turned her horse and rushed the nearest guard, who tried to cut her down before falling himself, headless. Rye Morgny stayed on his horse, which began bucking. I didn’t see what happened to him; an arrow whizzed just past my head, cutting it just over my ear. My horse went to buck me off, but I dismounted before it could, sword raised. Fezzik appeared too weak to move, and looked like he didn’t care if he died this night. He made a large target, so I went to defend him, but stopped in surprise, for that’s where Rye Morgny was. He had taken command of his horse with what I can only say was expert grace and brought it around to block Fezzik’s front. He held up his blade as I had shown him, his eyes raw saucers.

Arrows felled four or five more guards, but it was clear that Dynatis and his men weren’t surrounded. There were maybe two or three men out there in the dark, no more. The voice that had sounded out was familiar. I think we all figured out who it was at the same moment.

We killed all who rushed us. We glanced around for Bacco, but he had run off. We turned to locate the captain and gawked.

He was completely surrounded by men. Dynatis Rugen, like Bacco, had also run off. His horse snorted and wheeled about looking for him.

We went to help the captain, but it was too late. The guards—there were six of them—closed in, blades held high and murder in their gazes. Captain Montoya, sword at the ready, lowered his chin.

I'll never forget the display I witnessed then if I live to be a hundred. I could sense the confidence in our new captain. The guards didn't; or if they did, they ignored it. Either way, it was their undoing. They had the captain of the *Revenge* dead to rights, and were almost certainly thinking of the fame and fortune waiting for them when word got out that it was they who killed him.

They rushed him all at once, and then just like that three of them were dead at his feet. He had skewered them with a silent, swishing, spinning swiftness that beggared belief.

The three remaining bellowed in rage and rushed him hacking like woodsmen. I watched the sword hand of one fly through the air; and then the head of another; the third, sensing his fate, dropped his blade and fell to his knees and begged for his life. The captain slapped his face with his bloody blade and said, "Tell Rugen if I see him again, he'll be just as dead as his father. And if I see you again …"

He didn't finish the sentence.

"Run," he ordered.

The guard sprang up and hopped over the bodies of his fallen comrades and fled into the deep and dark night under the boughs of Harshtree Forest.

The men who had "surrounded" us were none other than Sam Racer and his two sons, who, without our knowledge, had followed us here and hidden in the forest ready to help if we needed it—which we did.

We found Bacco on his side in a ditch some ways on, whimpering uselessly. He couldn't get up. I thought Captain Montoya would kill him, but Fezzik stayed his hand.

"He fed me extra once every two weeks," he said. "He didn't have to. Let him live, Inigo." He smiled at Bacco. "Thank you, Bacco," he said with absolute sincerity.

Bacco still had shackles on, his arms restrained behind his back. "I *helped* you!" he shrieked at the captain. "Without me that incomprehensible mountain of flesh never would have escaped! Without me he would be *dead!* Free me! *Help me up and free me!*"

"Throw him the keys," the captain said, then turned back to Bacco. "Free yourself, and help yourself. But you will not come with us. You tried to double cross us. I knew you would. You and your friend Rugen … you're cowards. Certainly, you are no longer worthy to be a crewmember of the *Revenge*, if you ever were."

Hindy threw the keys. They hit with a gravelly clang by Bacco's side. He glared up at us, his brow glistening with sweat, his face twisted in frustrated anger.

And that's where we left him, shrieking after us at the top of his voice. It was at least a mile before we couldn't hear him anymore.

We met the *Revenge* back at Taurdust Port. It sailed in two hours after we got there. The diggers found three small chests full of Guilder gold, enough to make us all rich men ten times over. We celebrated by feeding Fezzik (his appetite that night would become the stuff of legends) and pulling up anchor as quickly as we could and getting the hell out of there before Florin officials caught wind of our whereabouts. But not, of course, before saying good-bye to Sam Racer and his sons and giving them a generous portion of the booty in heartfelt thanks.

Fezzik was safe; so too was the young man named Rye Morgny.

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